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H. N. BYÀLIK AND HIS POEMS<sup>1</sup>.

*Translated from the writer's Russian MS. by*  
HELENA FRANK.

## I.

*Habent sua fata, libelli, scriptores.* An author may have talent and even genius, his work may be intrinsically good, but this is not enough to secure him contemporary fame beyond the limits of his immediate literary surroundings. Widespread recognition and success depend on other things as well: on the political status of the people to whom he belongs; on the language in which he writes; on the general disposition of the public at the moment of his appearance; on the purely accidental feeling towards him of one or two influential critics; last, but perhaps not least, on the writer's origin.

The universal celebrity of Maxim Gorki is not due so much to his incontestable genius and originality as to the growing interest of the civilized world in the empire of 150 millions, of whom he is looked upon as the representative. To take the factor of language—"Die Leute von Seldwyla" by the Swiss Gottfried Keller, though written in a comparatively familiar tongue, is little known outside the German literary world, while G. Ohnet, a far less powerful writer than G. Keller, is widely read—thanks to the French language and the everywhere admitted charm of French polite letters—in other countries than France. Multatuli is a stranger to most bookshelves, less on account of his deficiency in form than because of the

<sup>1</sup> As materials for this article may be mentioned: Byàlik's works in separate editions, and in Jewish periodicals; articles by T. Klausner; recollections of certain of the poet's friends and acquaintances.

slender interest taken by foreigners in contemporary Holland, and because of the rarity of the acquisition of Dutch. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Bellamy's *Looking Back* are well-known examples of books whose celebrity is largely due to their having appeared at the psychological moment. Had the Scandinavian authors no such propagandist as G. Brandes, were there no colonies of Scandinavian *littérateurs* and artists in the chief European centres writing fluently in many tongues, and bent on publishing abroad the fame of their compatriots, the literature of their small countries would be unknown in the rest of Europe to this day. And it is possible that Tolstoi and Gorki owe not a little of their popularity—the first, to his title of Count, the second, to his romantically humble extraction.

Present day Jewish literature in Hebrew or Yiddish, a literature born and cradled in adversity, knows of no favouring circumstance, and suffers continually from the unnatural conditions under which its people are living. Earth has no single corner of whose nature and culture it can claim to be the complete expression. The majority of those Jews who are regarded by the Gentile world as representing the Jewish people, declare that Jewish national literature is a thing of the past. The Jewish "upper ten thousand" either does not know, or tries to forget, both languages above-mentioned—the historic language of Judaism, and the language of the Exile. There might be any number of good writers in Hebrew and Yiddish, and their very names not reach the ears of the Jewish upper classes, who only become aware of their existence when they are mentioned by some more fortunate western brother and fellow-writer. No people neglects its intellectual treasure to the same extent as the Jewish. Even the Hebrew works of Asher Ginsberg (Ahad Ha'am), who has contributed so much to the spiritual regeneration of the Jewish millions in Russia, are practically unknown, not only among Gentile students, but among the educated

Jews of the West, while even a Max Nordau has made no secret of his inability to appreciate them. The *Jewish Encyclopedia* contains many proofs of this ignorance of East-European Jewish life. To take the one which concerns us most nearly: there was no room found for the Hebrew poet Byàlik in vol. III (Be-Ch) which is dated 1902, although a collection of his poems had appeared a year previously. It is only in an article on general Hebrew literature in vol. VIII, that we find two half-lines on the subject of this article. And it is only quite lately, thanks to the publication by the *Jewish Quarterly Review* (October, 1906) of a translation of his Yiddish poem on the pogròms, that some interest has been aroused here in Byàlik's personality and in his other works.

## II.

Hayyim-Nahman Byàlik was born in 1873 into a poor family in the hamlet of Rady, in Volynia. His father was a pious Hassid, versed in Rabbinical and Talmudic lore, at one time accountant to the local millers and dealers in wood. At the time of the poet's birth he kept a tavern for the peasants. It is surely only among the old-fashioned Jews that we find these strange double personalities, or rather, that we see men living in two worlds: one, a world of small traders, street porters and publicans—of petty and sometimes sordid realities; the other, a dream-world filled with the highest conceptions of moral beauty and of a religious and spiritual nationalism. Byàlik's father, while he poured out *vodka* for the peasants and listened to their drunken mutterings, would be racking his brain over some question in the Talmud or Kabbalah, or puzzling out the hidden meaning of a story from the life of a Zaddik<sup>1</sup>. Rady, like all the villages in South-west Russia, was surrounded by fields and woods, and intersected by gardens, and if there were no mountains to be seen, there

<sup>1</sup> Saint.

were hills and green banks, and the soul of the future poet drank unconsciously of the quiet beauty of his surroundings. In 1879, the family moved to Zhitòmir, and settled in the outskirts of the town. The neighbourhood was still almost rural—but Ḥayyim-Naḥman was now six years old, and the “yoke of the Torah” was laid on his shoulders. He began with the Pentateuch and the Psalms (with their scholastic interpretation), and quickly passed on to the Talmud and the Rabbinical literature. But his severance from Nature was not complete, for the *heder* (school) stood near a line of hills at the feet of which were some little lakes, and the pupils spent their free time out of doors lying under the trees, and looking across to the wood.

In the course of a year the father died, leaving a family of seven destitute souls. The mother was forced to confide her children to different relatives better off than herself, and to sell small-ware in the street. Byàlik's recollections of this period of his life are to be found in sequence in the poem: “My song” (שירי). The boy Ḥayyim-Naḥman fell to the lot of an old grandfather, none too well pleased to have him. But the child showed such unusual intellectual aptitude that the old man, who was revered as an eminent Talmudist and scrupulous Ḥassid, soon grew fond of his little grandson on whom he looked as his spiritual inheritor. Holding to the beautiful Talmudic interpretation of the text: “A threefold cord is not quickly broken” (Ecclesiastes iv. 12), he was persuaded that the light of the Torah would not be extinguished “where the grandsire taught the grandchild.” But this made him only the more exacting as to the fulfilment of tasks and religious duties, and all outbreaks of boyish mischief on Ḥayyim-Naḥman's part were severely punished. Ḥayyim-Naḥman being a very lively customer, there was no end to the pinches, slaps, and beatings he received, and not only from his grandfather and his rabbi: his numerous relatives, out of pity, so they

averred, for both grandfather and fatherless grandchild, corrected him on their own responsibility. Of course the boy was only provoked to wrath by this rough treatment, and revenged himself as best he could by a fresh series of tricks. At the same time he showed a passion for reading, and this he had ample means of gratifying, for his grandfather's store of books included, beside the Midrash, Kabbalistic works, others of a combined moral and philosophical nature, and stories of the lives of the saints. At eleven years old, he was already dipping into such philosophical works as the *Cuzari* of Jehudah Halevy and the *Moreh Nebukhim* of Maimonides. We are not called upon to suppose he understood them, but we must remember that in old days the Jewish scholar of eleven had already been through the difficult Talmudical commentaries known as Tossafoth and others. Anyway, the perusal of these books opened his mind to the enlightening influence of the Haskalah<sup>1</sup>, the publications of which he was to come across a little later on.

The writer in Byàlik showed himself early. Ḥayyim-Nahman was only seven when he started creative work in a mixture of Hebrew, the Syriac of the Targum, and Yiddish. His teachers, like the generality of melammedim, were of limited instruction and intelligence, but there was one with a passion for the Agadah, who imbued him with that affection for the Midrash which has enriched his poetry with so many words, expressions, and themes. In his poem: "To the Agadah," Byàlik tells us what he owes to the poetry of the Talmudical period. Another teacher, with a *penchant* for the Bible pure and simple, led him to study the Prophets, at whom the Ḥassidim looked askance as being too liberal in their ideas of religious duty. At thirteen, Byàlik was confirmed and set free from *heder*, and he began to study for himself in the Beth Hammidrash (Rabbinical College).

<sup>1</sup> The move for enlightenment originated in Germany by Moses Mendelssohn, and which spread thence into Russia.

There was scarcely any one there in the intervals between the prayers, for the local Jews were all busy in their various callings. Only the Dayyan<sup>1</sup> went in and out to wind the clock, and to help the boy student in the capacity of elder comrade. Byàlik made use of the solitude to read the books issued by the Haskalah, and he began to dream of going abroad and entering a rabbinical seminary. Being, however, without means to that end, and with no hope of obtaining them, he presently limited his ambitions to the curriculum of the Yeshibah or academy of Volozhin.

Volozhin—an old-fashioned little town in the government of Vilna—is chiefly inhabited by Jews. At the suggestion of the Vilna Gaon, Rabbi Elijah, the head of the Misnagedîm, one of his scholars, the wealthy Rabbi Hayyim Volozhiner, founded in Volozhin, in 1803, a higher academy for the study of the Talmud and the checking of the spread of Hassidism. The custom of arranging for the supply of free meals to needy students by the householders, common to all other academies, was not practised in Volozhin. Hither came only those who had already distinguished themselves by their capacity or their acquirements, and the necessitous were supported by the academy itself. As time went on, the beams of West-European culture began to creep into the Yeshibah of Volozhin. Some of the students were afterwards to be found among the most enlightened rabbis in all Russia; others proceeded to rabbinical seminaries, and occupied posts abroad; others became Hebrew writers, and yet others entered Russian schools and were transformed into Russian Intellectuals and all manner of “ists.” Towards the close of the '80's, the reactionary and anti-Semitic government tried to lord it over the Volozhin academy. But the directors chose rather to close it than bow to the hated tyrant.

It was long before Byàlik's grandfather would consent to his nephew going to Volozhin, for Lithuania, in which

<sup>1</sup> The town-rabbi's legal assistant.

the town is situated, was known to be full of heretics, i. e. non-Ḥassidim. But having convinced himself, to his sorrow, that Byàlik had already lost his faith in the Zaddikim, he gave way. Byàlik had no sooner entered the academy than he was seized by the spirit of the place, and threw himself upon the Talmud with such ardour that a few months later the head of the academy declared: "His ancestors must have been Lithuanians! In justice to the Rosh-Yeshibah: the proverb, *Litvak = Zelemköpp*" (cross- or sharp-head) is current wherever Yiddish is spoken.

Byàlik has described his life in Volozhin in the long poem: *הַמְתַּמִּיר*, best translated by the German *der Vielfleissige*. Another few months, and he joined the secret group of the Maskilim (who had mostly received their enlightenment through the medium of the Neo-Hebrew literature), and began to learn Russian. One of the first Russian books to fall into his hands was a collection of verses by the Jewish poet S. Frug, and Byàlik, as he read, felt his own slumbering genius stir vaguely within him. But his earliest printed work was in prose, the occasion of its appearance being as follows:—

The first two articles of Aḥad Ha'am on spiritual Zionism, published two years before, had made a profound impression on all readers of Hebrew by reason of their simplicity of form, and the originality of their contents. Their author, at the time the articles were written, had founded the secret society of the Benè Mosheh (which existed eight years), for the propagation of the spiritual Zionism mentioned. Then another Jewish writer, Yavetz, had taken the field with an Orthodox Zionism which united European culture with the minutest observances of old-fashioned Judaism. The wave of controversial excitement roused by these two authors swept through the Volozhin academy, and a Zionist group was founded (this was before the day of shekels, committees, and congresses), which entrusted Byàlik, who had declared for Aḥad Ha'am, with the drafting of a manifesto embodying a com-



promise between the opponents, and which was printed in the Petersburg *Hamelitz*.

But little by little Byàlik tired of his stay at the Yeshibah, and he went secretly to Odessa, the centre of Jewish intellectual life, and, moreover, the home of Aḥad Ha'am, with whom he was afterwards to form a close friendship. Without connexions, without means, without even a sufficient knowledge of his country's language, the eighteen year old youth adventured himself into the great Russian city. Shy, and of somewhat uncivilized manners, he did not know where to turn for help and guidance. Fortunately, the son of the then Rabbinical assistant was a former student at Volozhin, and his family secured for Byàlik some gratuitous instruction, and a pupil to whom he gave lessons in Hebrew. For a few months all went well. Then the pupil died, and Byàlik was once more adrift, when a happy chance brought him together with the veteran Jewish writer M. L. Lilienblum, to whom he showed his verses, and who gave him an introduction to Aḥad Ha'am. The latter chose the poem, "To a bird" (אל הצפור), and sent it to the editor of the collection *Hapardes* for publication. The editor, Ravnitzki, took a fancy to other poems as well, but what could be expected by way of remuneration from a struggling Hebrew publisher?

1892 saw the closing of the Volozhin academy, and Byàlik, afraid that news of his truancy might reach his relatives, had just resolved to go back to them, when he heard that his grandfather was dying. Having pawned his earthly possessions for a few rubles, he hastened home. (See the two poems: "From a far country," and "The return.")

The grandfather died, leaving his grandson a small sum of money. Then the well-meaning relations stepped in and exhorted him to marry, for what says the Talmud? "at eighteen years—the bridal." Byàlik consented, and for some years he lived quietly, according to custom, in the house

of his wife's parents, busy perfecting his talents. A quantity of poems published by the firm Tushia, in 1902, belong to this period. Having "eaten his köst," he started life as an independent householder, and as a dealer in wood, hoping for abundant leisure in which to devote himself to literature. But not all poets have the business aptitude of William Morris, and Byàlik soon lost what little fortune he had, and was obliged to recommence giving lessons in Hebrew in the families of well-to-do merchants. The impressions received in the course of this occupation are recorded in the gloomy verses: "Surely, the people is grass" (אַכֵּן הָעָם קָצִיר הָעָם). In 1900 he went back to Odessa, where he is engaged with literature and teaching; he is assistant editor of the Hebrew monthly *Hashiloah*, gives lessons in Hebrew, and is a member of the publishing firm "Moriah."

### III.

Like the Hebrew writers of the past generation, Byàlik derives his inspiration almost exclusively from Jewish sources. But the older writers were ever unable to separate the kernel from the shell. Conscious or unconscious assimilators, they took upon themselves—with exception of the purely Biblical Judaism respected by the Jewish and Christian world alike—to look upon the whole of post-Biblical Jewish history and tradition as one tragic mistake. Criticizing the old customs and observances with heedless raillery, they called on Jewish youth to rebel against the Ghetto existence, and to shake themselves free from the stifling pressure of the past. But the generation to which Byàlik belongs, notwithstanding their usual freedom of attitude with regard to religious matters, have an intense admiration for the traditions of Judaism enshrined in the Talmud and the Kabbalah. They acknowledge that, only behind the walls of a Ghetto could such measure of individualism as is possible for a people surrounded by foes and deprived of their country, have

been preserved through the centuries. They see, at the same time, that no racial antagonism, no anti-Semitism or Judaeophobia, no complicated ritual, no external barriers would have saved the Jewish race from extinction without their deep-rooted love for the Torah—their joy in life, and their strength in death. In Heine's *Prinzessin Sabbath*, it is only on Friday evenings that the enchanted Prince Israel recovers his human form for twenty-four hours. In Byàlik's eyes, the starved and cowering creature "mit hündischen Gedanken" is never anything but a king's son, whose soul no evil magic has power to transform until he let go of his talisman—the Torah. Byàlik loves not only the Biblical Judaism clung to by the semi-assimilated, but also the Talmudical Judaism which has enriched the world with many spiritual treasures: the limitless devotion to the Torah, the resolve to endure affliction because of hope in the Messianic ideal, the abandonment of the argument of physical force, purity of morals and perseverance in all things. This spirituality of the Jewish race, conceived and formulated by the prophets in the territorial period of Israel's history, has been preserved through 2,000 years of persecution and exile. To the group which includes the remarkable poems concerning the Beth Hammidrash and the Yeshibah of the Russian Ghetto, belongs also: "If thou would'st know the source. . ." (אם יֵשׁ אֵת נִפְשֶׁךָ לְדַעַת אֵת הַמַּעְיֵן).

Byàlik, however, taking Jewish history *en bloc*, is not blind to the shadows in the picture. The intense spirituality of the Ghetto turned the Jews away from nature, from the fresh air, from a healthy normal life and simple pleasures. Byàlik sees and deplores the suppression, by the intellectual part of their being, of its physical complement—a suppression dangerous to heart and mind alike. He acknowledges the saving necessity for them to show some energy in self-defence, he is alarmed at the absence of primitive wildness in the character of the race. Especially sad in his eyes is the premature development of the Jewish

children. Their happy time ends almost with their babyhood. Heder-life usually begins for them when they are five to six years old, and it is a very hard and dreary one for that tender age. Therefore, and if we remember the poet's own unhappy boyhood, it is easy to understand why, in his contributions to Hebrew pedagogic literature, he continually reverts to the non-existence of childhood among the Jews. In one of his best poems: "Take me beneath thy wing" (הַכְּנִי־יְיָ תַחַת כְּנָפֶךָ), he expresses his own longing after youth and love:—

O come and take thou me  
Beneath thy wing, safe sheltered from all cares.  
Thy breast the refuge of my head shall be,  
The hiding-place of my rejected prayers.

In twilight's hour of ruth,  
Bend down and hear the secret of my pain:  
They say that somewhere in the world is youth—  
Then where is mine? for I have sought in vain.

Hear yet again, I pray.  
Consumèd is my soul with inward fire;  
And somewhere in the world is love, they say—  
What is this love, to which all hearts aspire?

The stars my gaze deceived.  
I had a dream, and now my dream has fled.  
I come with empty hands, of all bereaved,  
The last joy vanished and the last hope dead.

O come and take thou me  
Beneath thy wing, safe sheltered from all cares.  
Thy breast the refuge of my head shall be,  
The hiding-place of my rejected prayers.

There is a whole series of his poems dealing with Nature; the former Yeshibah student, the *Yeshive-Boher* of the Gass, is as sensitive as any other poet to her beauty and her melancholy, to the subtle influences of sunshine and cloud. The following from the "Summer Songs" is one of his earlier lyrics in the line under consideration:—

Weary am I of the sad, spoilt summer!  
 Noonday and midnight the changeless sound  
 Filling my ears of the splash of the rain  
 Falling in sheets on the soaked, sodden ground.  
 Rain that beats on the thatch overhead,  
 Rain that taps, taps, taps at the window,  
 Seems, it would show me the grey world around,  
 Seems, it would drive me to wish myself dead.  
 Yonder there lies th' unharvested cornfield,  
 Waits for the sickle in vain,  
 Lower and lower where runs the long furrow  
 Bent with the weight of the grain.  
 Heavy with fruitage, the trees in the orchard  
 Groan as if tortured,  
 Overladen, with straining boughs,  
 While from the branches, never stopping,  
 Long, long tears are slowly dropping  
 Down to the earth . . .  
 I know the rain is good,  
 And fraught with blessing for the thirsty land:  
 Anon 'twill call the reaper to the field  
 And fill the barn with food  
 For man and beast—it brings down bread from heaven,  
 The gift of God flung broadcast from his hand,  
 As in reward for toil;  
 That little tender shoots below the soil,  
 Deep, deep below,  
 Do nestle to the rain with sucking lips  
 Like infants to the mother's breast. I know  
 There's many a parchèd thing  
 That waits for the fulfilment which the rain  
 Alone can bring.  
 I know, full soon the sun will shine again  
 And touch the apple's cheek with deeper red,  
 And ev'ry labour of our hands repay.  
 I know it friend—and yet I grieve to lose  
 One moment of the summer, brief at best,  
 To see her petals fall, untimely shed,  
 And all sweet hues and odours washed away.

Poems on other subjects express, not the pensive melancholy of the above, but a gloom verging on despair. Byalik is cut to the heart to see the Jewish middle class,

careless of the high traditions of their race, given over to the pursuit of wealth, and bent on nothing better worth having than titles and decorations. What are these descendants of Jacob not ready to give for Esau's lentil pottage? For a smile from a non-Jew they will renounce their own and their children's part in the heritage of Israel. The poem: "Surely the people is (withered) grass," has been mentioned.

Questions of social economy have no attraction for Byàlik in themselves, although there are echoes of them in many of his verses. In contrast to most Jewish poets, such as M. Rosenfeld in Yiddish and "Yehallel" in Hebrew, Byàlik is less concerned with the plight of the Jews than with the plight of Judaism. The economic side of his people's life interests him only in so far as the soul of a nation depends on the bodies of its component units—  
 תורה אין קמה אין דאס—“Where there is no bread, there is no Torah,” said the old Fathers. In the beautiful poem: “The hope of the poor destitute,” we find a sick *melammed* lying among strangers and dreaming of his return home—and even here the spiritual element predominates.

The more complicated became the life of the Russian Jews, the more Byàlik's muse inclined to tragedy. Then came the Kishineff thunderclap—Byàlik hastened thither to collect information, and the result of what he heard and saw was the poem: “On the massacre” (על הַהֲרָגָה). This powerful, bitter, and horrible description of the pogrom puts every other attempt at the same thing into the shade. Byàlik has also published a Yiddish version of this poem, named “Die Shechitah - Shtadt,” and it is this Yiddish poem a partial translation of which appeared in the *Jewish Quarterly Review*. As we hope to see also an English translation of the Hebrew על הַהֲרָגָה, we will not dwell upon it. The author gives a ghastly picture of the barbarity of the rioters, and flings terrible accusations at the Jews themselves; but the climax of horror is reached in a few lines in which the yells, threats

and tumult of the mob give place to the silent, despairing apathy of the victims—the apathy of the man who lets his hands drop and is unable even to shriek aloud. It is certain aspects of this hopeless resignation, this pitiable acquiescence of the Jews in the inevitable for them and theirs, that move Byàlik to anger. Is this anger of his justified? only to a certain extent. But he is no photographer or reporter, rather a prophet whose very love for his people causes him to burn with indignation at their weakness. And he was still in Kishineff when he shook off his gloom and wrote the joyous poem: “To the sun,” with which he speeded the delegates on their way to the sixth Zionist Congress.

But soon there followed new misfortunes and disappointments: the crisis at the sixth congress, the death of Herzl, the substitution of Territorialism for the cherished historic ideal. Then came the Russo-Japanese war, the assassination of Plehve, and the rise of the Russian nation for freedom.

A new life opened for Russian Jewry—and the whole people went over to the revolution! Owners of industrial establishments, merchants, orthodox Talmudists, and Hasidim suddenly appeared side by side in the ranks of the extreme Left. “Warum gehören die meisten Juden zu den *Linken*?” once asked Prince Windischgrätz of the Austrian Democratic leader, Adolf Fischhof. “Weil sie keine *Rechte* haben!” answered the latter. And, as though at the wave of a magician’s wand, the very character of the Russian Jews underwent a change. Those who before hid themselves “in holes and corners” came forward and offered their own breasts as a protection for their brothers and sisters. Themselves in the *avant-garde* of the revolution, they inspired the whole of it, and their cause was not theirs only, but the cause of all alike. By what miracle was the “coward” of yesterday transformed into the combatant and even hero of to-day? The fact is, there are no essentially brave and cowardly races—their courage and timidity are the outcome of condition and circum-

stance. For nearly 1,800 years the Jews have never waged war, and they are accustomed to settle disputes between themselves without resorting to the fist. Fights within the Ghetto are of rare occurrence. Should one take place, the antagonists afterwards repeat, with a peculiar intonation, the words, "he lifted his hand against a Jew." The heads of the Jewish children in the *Hedarim* are not stuffed, like those of the children of "civilized" nations, with accounts of battles and the lives of wholesale shedders of blood, that still make up so much of present-day "history." The *Hedarim*, with all their shortcomings, taught another and better kind of heroism. And while in Spain the "cowardly" Jews perished with the "Shema'," the declaration of the Unity of God, on their lips at the stakes of the Inquisition, in Russia they refused to place in their windows and doorways the ikons and crosses which would have saved them from the rioters.

And now that Byàlik sees the Jews infected with the general savagery of the "civilized" world, and taking to knives, revolvers, and bombs, he is sorry. He grieves because the new life is not distinctively Jewish. He is afraid that the national elements will be swept away in the torrent of the revolution. They hold social-political meetings in the Beth-Hammidrash! Hebrew, which was flourishing only three to four years back, is giving way on all sides before the rapid onslaught of the more generally familiar Yiddish. And the Yiddish publications devote but little space to Jewish life and literature, the rest being taken up with advice given from the view-point of every political party to the mass of the Jewish electors. The lofty impulse to sacrifice everything to the Torah has been directed into other channels, and towards the end of 1904 Byàlik writes his profoundly melancholy poem: "The word," of which what follows is the second half:—

Behold the night—the shadows gather round,  
And we go stumbling forward like the blind.  
A *something* crossed our midst—no man knows *what*,



And no one speaks and there is none to tell  
If now for us the sun arose or set,  
Nor if he set for ever.  
And all around is chaos, black and vast,  
And refuge there is none.  
And if we cry aloud and if we pray—  
Who hears us?  
And if we fling an awful curse abroad—  
On whose head will it fall?  
And if we gnash our teeth and clench our fist—  
Whose skull shall start in twain?  
The void will swallow up, the wind will waft away,  
They perished once before—will perish thus again.  
No strength, no stay, we cannot see the road,  
The heavens are dumb.  
They know they sinned against us, grievously,  
And bear their sin in silence . . .  
Unclose thy lips, O prophet of last things,  
And hast thou words, then speak!  
Though bitter they shall be as death itself,  
No matter—only speak!  
Shall Death affright us? nay, his angel rides  
Upon our shoulders, and his bridle drags  
Our mouth incessantly . . .  
And with the risen corpse's ghastly smile,  
The gambler's hideous glee,  
For ever do we move toward the grave.

Byalik grows more and more convinced that the threatening fist which the Jew is now showing his tormentors will descend anywhere but on the latter's head. Byalik, however, is no fanatical Nationalist; nothing of the sort. He desires no wall of partition between the Jews and other races, only its disappearance is to be the result, not of assimilation, but of mutual respect and of possibility for the Jews to follow freely the bent of their national genius. And if he wishes for the downfall of the tents of Shem, it is only that he may see the former palace rise in their stead. At this moment the masses of the Russian Jews are daily more strongly attracted by the foreign life to which is due so much of the impoverish-

ment and degeneration of the Jewish people. And Jewish youth—the hope and stay of the race—throw themselves recklessly into the stormy life in common with their neighbours, a life forged and wrought by other than Jewish hands.

The poet expresses himself on this subject in the poem :  
“Surely this is the visitation of God” :—

God's chastisement is this and heavy curse :  
That you shall cast away your own live heart,  
Wring out your sacred tears beside all waters  
And string them on the first false thread of light,  
And pour your spirit into alien marble,  
And in the stranger's rock entomb your soul.  
While still the rav'ner's teeth are in your flesh,  
Your soul too shall you fling to him for food.  
And you shall build him Pithom, aye, and Ramses,  
With living bricks—your own and children's children.  
And when the child-soul cries from out the building,  
The sound shall die away before it reach you.  
If one among them grow a strong-winged eagle,  
For ever shall you scare him from the nest,  
And should he, thirsting for the sun, mount skyward,  
The light that he shall bring is not for you.  
His wings may part the clouds and free the sunlight—  
It shall not fall on you.  
Far distant shall he soar above the crags,  
His scream beyond your hearing . . .  
When thus you shall have spurned your best ones from you,  
One after other, you shall sit bereavèd,  
Your tent despoiled, all beauty fled your dwelling,  
A dread and desolation to be seen.  
God's blessing nevermore shall cross the threshold,  
Salvation's joy stand tapping at the window.  
And when you turn to pray, the words shall fail you,  
To weep—the tears, because your heart shall dry  
And fade and shrink—a garland from the vineyard  
That withers in a corner of the winepress.  
The sap shall never visit it again,  
The wine that bids the drooping heart rejoice,  
And yields refreshment to the languid soul.  
The hearthfire, when you crave it, shall have died,  
The cat mew loudly in the chilly ashes . . .

And you shall soon wax grey and moody—round you  
 The endless sadness, and within you, nothing.  
 Your eyes shall seek the dead flies in the window,  
 The spiders in unswept and empty corners,  
 And misery shall whine within the chimney,  
 The housewall shake to ev'ry passing tread.

The "Scroll of Fire" is a long symbolic poem in eight parts. After a beautiful opening in the style of the Agadah, it tells how a number of captive Jewish youths and maidens are cast by the foe upon the opposite shores of a desert island. The youths start to wander across the glaring, waterless plain. Typical of the Jews of the Rabbinical period, they shut their eyes on a cruel world, and their soul shrinks back upon itself. But the sound of a mysterious march, like the quiet beating of a heart, inspires them to advance, and the one who forces himself to peer from under his heavy lids sees among them two tall youths, one dark and one fair, in whose hearts beat the hearts of all. But the two youths are equal in stature one to the other, and there is no telling which of them is the real leader of the throng. Of these two genii of the Jewish race, the dark one is sent to mock and to destroy, and, in his scorn and hatred of the old Western civilizations in which he had, and might have, no part, he threatens not only what is rotten and pestilential, but that also which is of enduring worth and beauty. His is the song of revenge:—

From out the abyss of curses lift the song of strife,  
 Black as your smould'ring hearts,  
 And bear it to the God-rejected nations,  
 And blast them with its flame!  
 The song sows devastation o'er their plains  
 And ruin to their fields of rustling corn.  
 And when you wander, singing, through their gardens,  
 And touch the lilies, they shall droop and die,  
 And when you look upon their sculptured marbles,  
 Behold, they fall and crumble into dust.  
 And laughter, bitter laughter, cold and cruel,  
 Your sword wherewith to slay . . .

The fair youth, whose mission is to console and to uplift, reminds the excited company of the song of love and peace, the song of the future, but no one listens to him . . . All but he drink of the River and Peril and eat of the wild, bitter saltwort<sup>1</sup>. Now the troop of maidens appear in their turn, heedless of danger, above the steep bank of the stream. With their tightly closed eyes, thorn-encircled brow and beatific smile, they are the Jewish women who, in blind faith and sacrificial patience, have borne their lot through the centuries. "Like a flight of white storks" they plunge into the abyss. The horrified youths throw themselves in to the rescue, and all perish together—all but the fair youth who remains the sole type of the past and present of his race. The vision of his beloved of early days—his passion for whom he has since been taught to regard as sin—rises from the water and would lure him back into the depth. But the pillars of heaven are shaken, God himself destroys his Temple, a single spark of the holy fire on the altar is saved by a pitiful angel, and lies, tended by the Dawn, on a rock in the same island. The youth approaches the rock. Now he is torn between the earthly and the heavenly, the height and the depth—and in his anguish of desire he grasps at both. Snatching the divine spark to his breast, he leaps into the abyss, but the depth cannot swallow the spark, and casts him out . . . and now he wanders tormented by a threefold fire: the flame from the Temple altar, the flame of Satan, and the flame of earthly love—and still, because of the divine spark within him, he looks and longs for the Dawn.

A few words on the significance of Byàlik's poetry and on the attitude taken up towards it by Hebrew critics.

Native and foreign criticism are rarely at one when a living author is concerned. Sometimes the latter is made more of abroad than at home. Byron is a case in point. It oftener happens that home critics, succumbing

<sup>1</sup> Job xxx. 4, Rev. Ver.

to the charms of form and *milieu*, praise their own author overmuch, and there is a sense in which Goethe's beautiful lines :—

Wer den Dichter will verstehen  
Muss ins Dichters Lande gehen

are not quite true. Hebrew critics are loud in their praise of those poems in which Byalik treats of Nature and of love. It should be borne in mind that the Hebrew love-songs preserved to us are comparatively rare. The Biblical Song of Songs was interpreted as an allegory, and in the Hebrew revival in mediaeval Spain and Italy love, though a very frequent subject of occasional verses, did not inspire a love-poetry. We must, however, except the youthful poems of Jehudah Halevy in the twelfth, and the satirical work of Immanuel of Rome in the sixteenth century. The verses of Luzzatto and others in allegorical-didactic style deal with love of another kind. The New Hebrew poets have all tried their hand at the poetical expression of love. The attempts of the earlier among them show a preference for rhetoric over simplicity, and for the stringing together of sonorous words in would-be imitation of the Bible. Suddenly there appeared—speaking a human, but not the less Biblical, language—a whole array of young Hebrew poets: Byalik, Tchernichovski, Berditchevski, Feuerberg, Cohen, and others.

What are the chief characteristics of the new love-poems in the Hebrew tongue?

To judge from what we know of Jewish history, the ancient Jews were of an imaginative and passionate disposition, the influence of which on the relations between the sexes may be gathered not only from the Bible, but from the Midrash as well. Under the influences of the Rabbinical period, and thanks to the material conditions of Ghetto life, this vehemence was gradually subdued, and habits of moderation and restraint were induced in its stead. It was only the spread of assimilation among the middle classes that brought about a noticeable slackening

of morals—a borrowed trait, due, like alcoholism, to the wish to imitate. We find among the Jewish Intellectuals a frequently morbid craving after Nature and love. The German poets and novelists of Jewish extraction (in neither language is their proportion a large one), old and new, down to the *Jung-Berliner* and the *Jung-Wiener*, all harp on their *Sehnsucht nach Lebensfreuden*, and, having lamented the impossibility they are in of *sich ausleben*, they are usually silent as to the reason—namely, their own Jewishness.

The following fact goes far to explain the origin of Byàlik's works of the kind. "When Byàlik wrote his poems on love"—we inquired of the friend of his youth, to whom the poet had directed us, "Was he in love with any one himself?"—"No (was the reply), he married early, and remained faithful to his wife like all good Jews, but he began to write his love-poems when he first became acquainted with the poetry of Immanuel of Rome." Hence, in these poems, the absence of the sensual *tempérament* of the Latin races and of the longing for *das Ewig Weibliche* of the Germans. Their leading theme is a sigh for the loss incurred during the Exile of the power to enjoy oneself "like other people," a complaint that the poet himself never knew the sweet intoxication of a pure and youthful passion, with its power to enrich and beautify the whole of after-life.

Of course, they love in the Ghetto, quite as warmly, and certainly more faithfully, than do their neighbours. But where with the latter it is love to the *woman*, with them it is love to the *wife*, and always bound up with the thought of children, the continuation of the family and the race, and the fulfilling of a divine precept.

The Hebrew critics and readers are not a whit less enthusiastic over Byàlik's descriptions of Nature, in which the theme is the same—a continual lament over the exclusion of Nature from the daily life of the Jewish masses. Here again the enthusiasm is partly due to the fact that

Byàlik and his contemporaries have succeeded in proving: that Hebrew, with the help of the language of Rabbinical literature, is capable of expressing all the effects of light, sound, and colour.

But this, however important for readers of their verses in the original, cannot be expected to interest others to anything like the same extent. To the general reader, that part of Byàlik's work will seem the most original and significant which deals with national-historical and cultural subjects. His poems on life in the Beth Hammidrash and the Yeshibah and their poetic outlook on contemporary Jewish existence have been mentioned. But the poem which stands pre-eminent, even among his very best, is the "Tale (or *Sage*) of the Pogròm," not owing to its depth of thought, but because of its unwonted passion of expression and of its overwhelming effect on the reader, who feels every line fall like a hammer on his brain. The subject of the "Scroll of Fire" is larger and deeper in scope, but the poem betrays that want of the feeling for proportion characteristic of Jewish artistic creations in contradistinction to those of the Greeks. Undesirable, too, are its occasional lapses from the Biblical style, not that Hebrew is to be denied the right to some development in the course of 2,000 years, but because the Biblical form is the one best suited to the subject-matter of the poem. However—*la critique est aisée, l'art est difficile*. . . It is to be hoped that Byàlik's best poems will appear before long in English translations. English readers will then judge for themselves, whether or no there exists in Russian Jewry a poet such as the whole Jewish people may find it worth while to claim for their own.

B. IBRY.